

“Moses’ Ark”—Exodus 2:1-10

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Take your Bible and meet me in Exodus 2 so we can get after it.

Given that it’s Mother’s Day, I decided to postpone our study of the next text in Genesis, which happens to be one of the worst examples of the relationship between parents and children we have in the book. We’ll get to it, don’t worry. I thought today, however, we would look at a passage that has an interesting point of contact with the flood story we have been studying and has a number of beautiful examples of women being used in powerful ways for the sake of children. Seriously, this section of Scripture has some awesome examples. In the previous chapter we meet Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives, who risked their lives to defy a ruler who thought he had the right to order the murder of children in the birthing room.

And now, in chapter 2, we meet three more women that God used for the sake of His people, and the sake of one of those rescued children in particular, a boy by the name of Moses. But more than just learning about these women, this text can teach us something of God’s mysterious providence, which is put on display through the actions of these three unnamed women. One of these women is a nurturing mother put in an impossible situation. Another is a young girl who puts her quick reflexes to good use. And the third woman defies her wicked father and “demonstrates compassionate maternity is more than merely a biological process.”¹ These are the unlikely people that God chose and used to accomplish His redemptive purposes and it just may deepen your appreciation and gratitude for the sovereignty of God.

Let’s look at the text. As we jump into the story, where are we? Well, God’s people are enslaved in Egypt and the pharaoh, who is the leader in Egypt, just decreed that every male child born to the Hebrew people was to be killed in the Nile. It’s a horrible situation. With that context in mind, follow along as I read, beginning in verse 1 of Exodus 2. This is God’s Word...

“Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. ³ When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. ⁴ And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. ⁵ Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. ⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, ‘This is one of the Hebrews’ children.’ ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, ‘Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?’ ⁸ And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Go.’ So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁹ And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages.’ So the woman took the child and nursed him. ¹⁰ When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, ‘Because,’ she said, ‘I drew him out of the water.’” (Exodus 2:1-10)

What we just read was the account of Moses’ birth and a brief explanation of how he survived in a time when boys like him didn’t. The tale of God’s intervention begins with the mention of the boy’s parents in verse 1. Not much is said about them. Their names are given later in Exodus—Amram (his father) and Jochebed (his

mother). How these two came to be married is never explained, but their marriage is a kind of union that will later be forbidden in the very Law their son (Moses) would mediate (Lev. 18:12-14; Cf. Exod. 6).² We also discover later that Moses isn't their first child (Num. 26:59). They already had at least two children—a daughter, named Miriam (who we will meet in a few verses) and a son, named Aaron (7:7).

The focus here in Exodus 2:1 is not the identity of these parents (or their other offspring), but the fact that both these parents were Levites. At this point in history the Levites have no special significance. They are just one of the many tribes of Israel. But eventually Moses and his brother Aaron will inaugurate a priestly line coming from this tribe. These priests would represent God before the people and represent the people before God. Thus the Levites would have a special purpose in the life of Israel. In establishing that Moses has this double-Levitical heritage, the text is anticipating the special priestly role that Moses will have before the people of Israel. He will represent them before God and God before them, not merely in a ritual way (like Aaron and his descendants), but in the actual events that await us in the story. You can see this especially in Moses' prayers and the way he mediates God's Law to the people at Mt. Sinai.³ All that to say, that priestly heritage is being foreshadowed here in verse 1.

The actual birth of Moses is summed up in verse 2. Jochebed delivers the child, quickly realizes she has a son, and therefore hides him from the authorities that were seeking to kill all the male children. The text says, "*she saw that he was a fine child,*" but what it was about the child that seemed special is never explained. He probably wasn't glowing or anything like that. Perhaps the description means that he was handsome (cf. Acts 7:20; Heb. 11:23). It may signify that he was healthy. But the Hebrew literally reads, "and she saw that he was good." Does that sound familiar? It should. It's not a moral statement. That's an expression that is repeated again and again in the creation account of Genesis 1. God creates light, then God saw that it was good. God gathers the waters, then God saw that it was good. God created the vegetation, then God saw that it was good. And so on and so forth with each new phase of the creation account.⁴ So here, in Exodus 1, we have creation language.⁵ God's creating or recreating again. It's not about the birth of one man. It's about the birth of a people, a new beginning, where God's creative purposes and creational designs can be realized.⁶ And there is more creation language in the next verse.

According to Hebrews 11:23, she and her husband hid their child for three months because "*they were not afraid of the king's edict.*" Just like the midwives we met in the previous chapter, they feared God more than Pharaoh. They were living by faith, not by fear. Unfortunately, in the fourth month, the boy's mother realizes that he is no longer safe in their home. At that age he was, no doubt, gaining some mobility and crying with more volume, both actions could potentially draw unwanted attention from the authorities, who would have abducted and killed the child, if they discovered he was being sheltered. So, when she could no longer hide the baby safely, she comes up with a plan. She's going to put the child in a basket and deposit the basket on the Nile. Verse 3 tells us that she takes a basket made of bulrushes (or reeds of papyrus), which grew in the area, and she coated it with bitumen (or tar) and pitch to seal up the holes.⁷ In effect, this gave the basket the ability to float and provided some shelter from the elements and creatures on the river.

You may be thinking, "What kind of plan is that?" That doesn't seem like a good idea. How would a child survive on the water? The elements would kill him eventually, if he's not malnourished, devoured, or drowned first. Why on earth would she carry out this desperate plan? These are difficult questions to answer because the text doesn't spell out her logic. The most we can say is that God placed this plan on her heart to bring to fruition His redemptive purposes.⁸ She's operating with at least some hope (even if that hope has burned down to just a flickering wick) because why else would she go through the trouble of sealing up the basket, if she didn't think there was at least a chance God might intervene and deliver the child. She must have considered the possibility that he might be discovered and rescued by someone. That's why she readies the basket. Surely a floating basket would draw attention. Someone would take the time to investigate that oddity. Maybe someone would intervene who could care for the child in a way she no longer could. Maybe they would show compassion. There's no hope for the child with her. There's at least a faint chance on the water, if the right person discovered the child. That may have been her thinking.

But it's also possible that she has chosen the location of the drop off strategically. Is it not conceivable that she knew that place where the Egyptian princess bathed regularly and meant all along for her to discover the child? The fact that the child's sister is watching all of this from a distance, may suggest that there was some design to the actions, but we cannot know for certain. Yet even if that was the plan all along, this mother has no way of knowing if the princess will rescue the child. It was her father after all who demanded that these children be drown in the water. Maybe she would just retrieve the basket and leave the boy on the waves. At the very least we can say that the child's mother thought this was the only hope for the child's future. It's a proverbial "crying basket at the door of the orphanage" situation that we tend to think of, except in this case the porch is the Nile, and the nun is an Egyptian princess.⁹ Clearly, however, "the hand of God's providence was at work in preserving the life of Moses" through these very means.¹⁰

Before we consider the outcome, let me mention something that's easy to miss in English. The word for "basket" in verses 3 and 5 is a word that everywhere else is translated "ark" and is always used in reference to Noah's "ark." Evan mentioned that detail a couple weeks ago in passing. That connection is hardly accidental. Every Hebrew reader would pick up on this point of contact and pondered the similarities between the Flood narrative (Gen. 6-9) and this story. Remember the Flood is presented as a re-creation of sorts, which draws on creation language from the beginning of Genesis just like the Exodus story does. In both stories the "ark" in question is coated in "pitch" to protect it from the elements (Exod. 2:3; Gen 6:14). Both "arks" contain special men that God has called to play significant roles in His redemptive plans to preserve His people.¹¹ While their respective "arks" were drastically different in size (Moses was not floating downstream "in a three-story zoo" for a bassinet¹²), but both Noah and Moses were adrift in the chaotic waters of their time only to pass from death to new life (1 Pet. 3:20-22).¹³ The waters they survive are the very waters that claimed the lives of many others. Ironically, the Hebrew word for "ark" sounds remarkably similar to the Egyptian word for "coffin."¹⁴

Furthermore, this part of the Exodus story anticipates some things we are going to see later. The way the infant Moses is delivered through the water is going to be replayed on a grander scale when the nation of Israel, in the infancy of her existence, will pass through the waters (Exodus 14).¹⁵ And what waters will Israel pass through? We usually say the Red Sea, but in Hebrew it's literally "the sea of reeds" (e.g., 13:18; 15:4). Did you catch where Jochebed put the basket? According to verse 3, "among the reeds" (same word). So there's some foreshadowing at work in Exodus 2.

Once the basket is in the water, verse 4 tells us the boy's "*sister stood at a distance to know what would be done with him.*" Then at some point, the next verse explains, one of the daughters of Pharaoh comes down to the water to bathe¹⁶ and she spots the basket. At her request, her servant retrieves it and peers inside and find a crying baby. And, according to verse 6, she says, "Awwwwwww!" Well, not exactly (but maybe). She says, "*This is one of the Hebrews' children.*" And we're told that "*she took pity on him.*" Collectively all the readers breathe a sigh of relief. Taking pity on the child means that she is not going to kill the child, even though her father required that all these Hebrew boys be drown. She has no intention of following that edict after seeing this boy.

Sensing an opportunity, the boy's sister pops out of the background and asks the Egyptian princess, "*Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?*" (1:7). That seems like a good suggestion to the princess, so she sends the girl away to recruit one of her people to nurse the child. The princess knows there are many grieving, Hebrew mothers around who have lost their sons to the Nile recently and are therefore biologically able to nurse a child, since the princess herself cannot. Of course, the princess has no idea the girl is the infant's sister. Not surprisingly, the sister, Miriam, knows just the woman to nurse the child—their biological mother, Jochebed. When she comes before the princess, she's given the instructions we find in verse 9—"*Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages.*" I've always wondered how she replied. How hard it must have been for her to keep her composure and fight back the tears so the princess was none the wiser about her relationship to the child. And in a funny twist, Jochebed is actually paid to nurse her own child.¹⁷ What a turn of events!

Of course, that will not last forever. We don't know how much time passes between verses 9 and 10, but eventually, when the child is done nursing, "*she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son.*" That had to be bitter-sweet. She must have cherished the extra time with her son in those nursing years. Her family must have passed on as much of their heritage to him in those early years. But the time came when he had to be returned to the princess. As hard as that was, any mother would much prefer that outcome to the all but inevitable death that would have resulted had he not been discovered by the princess on that fateful day. Furthermore, the princess adopts the child as her very own son. He would not grow up as a slave, but as a prince. We don't know the dynamics of their relationship, but there's no reason to doubt it was a loving relationship. She risked a lot to take the boy in. She defied the most powerful man in the land.¹⁸ She didn't have to raise someone else's child. Her adoption of the boy meant that he would receive the highest benefits the land could afford. For her to do that, she had to want to do that, which suggests to me some measure of compassion and sincere love.

It is also the princess who names the child "Moses." That name is a play on words from two different languages from the two different cultures of his upbringing. It sounds like the Egyptian word for "son of." That "m-s" syllable is common in Egyptian names like "Ramses" (son of [the sun god] ra) or Thutmose (son of [the god] tut). In Moses case it's just, "son of" with no mention of his descent, perhaps because the princess doesn't know his background (cf. Heb. 11:24-25). On the other hand, the name "Moses" sounds a lot like the Hebrew verb meaning "to draw out." That's a fitting name because, as she says, "*I drew him out of the water*" (2:10). Later, of course, it will be Moses who draws out his people from the land of Egypt. It's going to be fun for us to see that play out together.

But what do we learn about God in our text today? Well we learn a number of things about God's providence. Let me mention three of those things in particular. Here's the first one...

God's Providence Is Always Present Even When He Seems Absent

Did you notice that God is not mentioned in this series of events? Yet it's undeniable He is orchestrating these events. These are not coincidences we are reading about. These are God-incidences.¹⁹ God is sovereignly maneuvering the people and circumstances and none of the original audience would have denied this. We should not deny it either. It's God's way, His m.o. (*modus operandi*). Listen to these famous words Paul wrote to the Romans...

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

Commenting on this verse in relation to Exodus 2, Anthony Selvaggio writes,

"While the events of our lives may seem incredibly trivial in comparison to the major events that have unfolded in God's redemptive plan, this divine pattern of God bringing good things out of bad is replicated in the pattern of our lives. The truth of Romans 8:28 is, in fact, most relevant and true at those very moments when we are most likely to place its truth in doubt. God always 'works all things together for the good of those who love him' (Rom. 8:28). Our problem is that we often do not see or understand his gentle hand of providence while we are in the midst of trouble. Yet, even in our most desperate moments, he is there. He is there working all things together for good for us...Moses wasn't the only person who experienced the power of God's providence; every believer enjoys this privilege. What this means for us is that...we can be comforted by the knowledge that God is aware of our struggles and, more importantly, will use our trials for good and his glory."²⁰

This is really important for us to see in the text this morning. We have to remember that all of this story occurs in a time that was more dire than any God's people had ever faced. If there was ever a time where they would be tempted to think God had forgotten them or abandoned them, it was now. What could they point to as evidence of His care? Yet we see, through the benefit of hindsight and the bird's eye view of the narrator, that God is in fact doing something remarkable in their midst, though the people as a whole (and even the family directly involved) never could have predicted the "good" that God was up to in their circumstances. We have to see this and remember that God hasn't changed. He has promised us to work all the details of our lives—the sweet and bitter providences—for our good and His glory. If that was true for them in the dark times that they lived, then it is certainly true for God's people today. It's true for every Christian in this place. Take heart. God is working behind the scenes in ways you can't see. Your blindness to His activity, doesn't erase its reality.

Another commentator offers some helpful wisdom related to these ideas.

"Too frequently passages such as Romans 8:28 are thought to mean that God works *against* our everyday trials to bring some good out of it. Although it is true that God can and does at times deliver his people *from* such circumstances, most Christians would agree that it is more common for the Lord to work *through* our circumstances; indeed, he puts us *in* certain difficult situations precisely because he plans to work some good in our lives. And that "good" is not a temporary shot in the arm but nothing less than God's conforming us ever more to the image of his Son. The point, then, is that God works not so much *despite* our circumstances as in them, through them, with them."²¹

That's so true. But don't you wish you had the script that God has authored for your life? This leads to a second lesson...

God's Providence Is Often Detected Only In Retrospect

There is no way that Moses' biological mother, or his sister, or the rest of his people could have imagined the historical significance of these events. It all felt personal. It was a big deal for them, but never in their wildest dreams could they have imagined that God was not just protecting a boy that meant something to them but raising up a savior to deliver their whole people. Never could they have imagined that no greater deliverer would ever walk the earth until God's own Son came in human flesh. Never could Moses' biological mother have imagined amid the pain of handing her son to the daughter of Pharaoh, that God was orchestrating the boy's circumstances so that he could receive the best education the world could offer and be equipped for the unique calling of mediating between two peoples and between God and people (Acts 7:22). Never could they have imagined that even the most obscure details of these events anticipated future acts of God that His people celebrate to this very day. Yet that's that God was doing. All that and more.

In their life they would realize some of this however, but it would only be decades later. It would come after many years of suffering when they finally had a moment to look back and consider their lives in retrospect. And that's often the case in our lives as well. God's providence is always present in your life, but you will often not see it until you view your life in retrospect. That takes time. Learn that lesson from this text and it will deepen your faith in those seasons when you are waiting for God's past activities in your life to come into view. "This is true," Selvaggio writes, "even when our story does not end well and things do not turn out 'right' in the end. Even when we fail to experience a 'happy ending,' God is still working for our good and his glory."²²

Here's another lesson...

God's Providence Often Comes From Surprising Sources

One of the reasons we fail to see the hand of God in our lives is because we can't see it until we have some distance between us and our current circumstances. But another reason we often fail to detect His activity is because we're looking for it in the wrong places. God chooses the weak things in the world to shame the strong. God chooses the foolish things (like the cross), to shame the wise. God doesn't operate in accord with worldly wisdom. He loves to flip that wisdom on its head. And, if that is true (and it is according to Scripture), then that means it should not surprise us that God uses surprising sources of providence in our lives. It shouldn't surprise us that God would use the Nile that was meant to destroy His people's male children, to be the means of saving the deliverer of His people. It shouldn't surprise us that God would use a woman from the enemies of God's people to care for and nurture the one whom God would use to draw them out of slavery. These patterns are instructive for us. Don't be surprised if God uses surprising sources to provide for His people today as well.

These are some of the main lessons this text is teaching us. And these are lessons the Gospel teaches us. How did God choose to save? Through One that the world judged as weak, through a cross that most judge as foolishness. As the prophet said, Christ *"had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him"* (Isa 53:2; NIV). He was not what people expected. He's not what people thought they needed. He was what people deemed worthy to discard. As John said, *"He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him"* (John 1:11).

But fortunately, that's not all John said. He adds, *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to be children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of men, but of God"* (John 1:12-13). Despite our rejection, in other words, God willed to save. How? Because Christ died for sinners. And through faith in Christ, we can experience forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God. Our sins against a holy God deserve to be punished. Justice must be served. The question is who will be the recipient of that justice—you or Jesus Christ in your place? When Jesus died on the cross He took upon Himself our sins and He substituted Himself in our place, experiencing every drop of God's justice and wrath deserved by sinners. When He rose from the grave we are assured that His sacrifice was sufficient to remove our sins.

But it's only through faith in Christ that we can experience that forgiveness, that salvation. It's only through trusting in Christ that we can have peace with God. Unless Jesus is our substitute through faith, then we have no substitute and the justice we deserve will be experienced personally by us one day. But He came and made a way through His death and resurrection for you to be made right with God and receive salvation. Believe in Him and you will be saved. If you want to discuss that, let's talk after the service. There will be a pastor at each of the exits.

For now, let's pray...

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 19.

² Basically, the most natural reading of Exodus 6:16-20 would seem to indicate that the union consisted of a nephew marrying and aunt. And, just to really hurt your brain, that would mean that Levi was both Moses' grandfather and great-grandfather at the same time. John D. Currid, *Exodus – Volume 1* (EPSC; Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2000, repr. 2014), 51; John L. Mackay, *Exodus* (Mentor Commentary; Great Britain: Christian Focus Publication, 2001), 46.

³ Peter Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 58; John N. Oswalt, "Exodus" in *Genesis, Exodus* (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 295.

⁴ See Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; 3:6; 6:2; 40:16; 49:15.

⁵ N. Sarna suggests that the creation account parallel "suggests that the birth of Moses is intended to be understood as the dawn of a new creative era." N. Sarna, *Exodus* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: JPS, 191), 9.

⁶ Tim Chester notes that in Genesis 1 humanity was meant to subdue the earth, whereas here in Exodus 1 Pharaoh is subduing humanity. But God's creational activity is at work nonetheless (Tim Chester, *Exodus for You* [Denmark: The Good Book Company, 2016], 23).

⁷ "Papyrus was a reed that grew abundantly on the banks of the Nile. Its inner pith was split and pasted together to provide a surface for writing, but the Egyptians used it for many other purposes as well: shoes, baskets, containers of various sorts and boats (Isa. 18:2). His mother constructed a miniature river boat, and to make it just like them she coated it with tar and pitch to make it waterproof. (It is not easy to tell the difference between tar and pitch; both refer to bituminous substances. Perhaps pitch was more liquid in consistency than tar.)" Mackay, 48.

⁸ Currid, 53.

⁹ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1999), 138. This is an anachronistic comparison to be sure, but one that may call to mind similar motives.

¹⁰ Anthony T. Selvaggio, *From Bondage to Liberty: The Gospel According to Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 7.

¹¹ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 38.

¹² Hamilton, 20.

¹³ Chester, 24.

¹⁴ James K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (UBCS; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 27.

¹⁵ Enns, 62.

¹⁶ "The wall paintings on Egyptian monuments show ladies of rank bathing in the sacred river with various female servants in attendance. Her attendants were walking along the riverbank to guard the privacy of the princess by keeping any from intruding." Mackay, 49.

¹⁷ "This appears to be a precursor of how the Hebrews would later plunder the Egyptians (Exod. 12:36)." Currid, 56.

¹⁸ John D. Currid writes, "If the Pharaoh at this time was Ramses II...then this was one of his many daughters. It is well known that he engendered over 100 children, including at least sixty daughters. The name of the daughter is not mentioned because it is not important to the theme or development of the story. Much later Apocryphal literature gives her name as Tharmuth (Jubilees 47:5), but there is no reason to accept the tradition" (53-54). Given that the Pharaoh could father so many daughters, it is certainly possible that he could have overlooked a new grandson being educated in his courts. Whether or not he knew the identity of Moses, however, we will never know.

¹⁹ I once heard Karen Jobes say something to this effect in reference to the events of Esther.

²⁰ Selvaggio, 9-10.

²¹ Enns, 73. How do we see that in our text? "God did not oversee Moses' birth despite Pharaoh's edict to kill all newborn males. It was not as if the Lord 'reacted' to the decree and thought, 'What am I going to do now?' Rather, it is precisely by means of this decree that God brings deliverance to his people. God is in full control both of Moses' birth and of the external circumstances that threaten to undo it. God does not remove Moses from the situation, nor does he strike down Pharaoh who dares to oppose him, both of which he certainly could have done. Instead, God places Moses in the same Nile that Pharaoh intends for the boy's harm, brings the boy right to Pharaoh's doorstep, and has him raised in Pharaoh's house. Why? To defeat the enemy decisively at his own game, at the very heart of his strength. Now the savior of Israel can grow up safe and secure, free not only from Pharaoh's wrath but from the debilitating effects of slavery. It is also from his 'Egyptian' vantage point that Moses can see more clearly the cruelty with which the Egyptians are treating the Israelites (Ex. 2:11-12)." Ibid.

²² Selvaggio, 11.